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## IX.—THE AMERICAN DIALECT DICTIONARY

I wish to call attention to a work of national importance, which, in the judgment of those best entitled to an opinion, should be accomplished within the next decade, if it is to be well done. As is doubtless known to everyone here to-day, there has been in progress for many years a plan to prepare and publish an adequate dictionary of our American vernacular speech. But the details of the undertaking, the plan that should be followed, and the special reasons for making more rapid progress are matters that have received comparatively slight attention, even in this Association of representative American scholars.

Very rarely has a question directly bearing upon our distinctive American speech been presented before this Association in the past twenty years. We listen with interest to papers of much learning and research on obscure dialectal questions relating to medieval French and German literature, and we do well, but we generally assume that questions relating to the peculiarities of our American speech will be sufficiently looked after by the American Dialect Society. At all events, the entire responsibility for considering the history and the present character of the language we try to speak is relegated to that Society. From one point of view this is well. The special questions relating to the details of American speech may be best considered by an association organized for that purpose, but an association formed, as this is, for the investigation of modern languages cannot entirely escape the duty of considering from time to time the fortunes of the language in which the transactions of the Asso-

ciation itself are printed. If one may judge, however, from the number of those that support the American Dialect Society and its investigations, there is in many quarters a very languid interest, and probably a very imperfect understanding, of the purpose of that Society. This lack of understanding in the outside world we have come to take as a matter of course. While Secretary of the Society I used regularly to receive inquiries from vaudeville agencies as to our lowest charge for a single performance. Perhaps I need not here explain that as professional entertainers on the vaudeville stage we have nothing to offer.

Doubtless one reason for this lack of interest and understanding is the fact that most Americans fail to realize that their pronunciation, their turns of phrase, and their vocabulary have American peculiarities, dating back hundreds of years, and they are inclined to resent the suggestion that their utterance is in any sense dialectal. As a whole, cultivated American speech is remarkably homogeneous, and when free from affectation compares very favorably with the best that England has to offer. An Englishman would have great difficulty in distributing the present audience into groups on the basis of dialectal differences, though in some degree such differences unquestionably exist.

But dialects flourish, not exactly in solitude, but in relative isolation. And there are dialect centers in America, where communities have been little disturbed for generations and have, without a thought of peculiarity, continued the habits of speech common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All sorts of cross-currents of speech have met, even in these communities, so that the historic continuity has been somewhat broken; and we have no-

where in America strongly marked dialects such as have been rooted for centuries in England or Germany or Italy. We have, rather, at most, a compromise speech which is a blend of elements not originally homogeneous. The pioneer from Dorset, for example, had as neighbors a Yorkshire man, a Warwickshire man, a Scotchman, an Irishman, and his children or grandchildren have picked up something from four or five chief sources, according to the degree of intimate association, while the main current of their speech represents what they have had in common with the language of the country at large.

These linguistic survivals are a more precious possession than we sometimes realize. It is not a matter of trivial interest that we have preserved in out-of-the-way corners of America some of the most expressive words of Dryden and Shakespeare that have long since vanished from literary English; that in our Southern States we have still current the ancient neuter pronoun *hit* which meets us so often in our earliest English and so rarely in literature after the fourteenth century.

The completion within the past decade of the great English dialect dictionary in six portly volumes of about a thousand pages each emphasizes the value of dialectal survivals and makes it possible to measure in some degree the extent and character of the work to be done in America. On this side of the Atlantic, however, the problem is in some particulars far more complicated than in England, owing to the peculiar conditions of development in a new country.

What some of these are we may well consider for a moment. America, as we cannot too often remind ourselves, was colonized for the most part in the seventeenth century. The English settlements made a thin fringe of civilization

along the Atlantic coast. Behind them stretched the great forests, the great rivers, and the great prairies. In the same century the French Jesuits and some French soldiers of fortune made their way into the regions of the North and the Valley of the Mississippi and left various French names, including those of their favorite saints, on a long line of settlements and trading posts from St. Lawrence to New Orleans. Thus the English settlements were kept from expansion toward the West. Quebec, Montreal, Detroit, St. Louis, New Orleans, marked some of the great strategic points where the French had gained a foothold and stood ready to check the advance of the English.

But the westward movement was inevitable and irresistible, and in the course of time the English broke through the frontier line and swept across the prairies to the Pacific. In the main the migration followed the parallels of latitude, the men of Massachusetts and Vermont and Connecticut going by preference to Ohio and Illinois and Iowa rather than to Virginia and Tennessee and Arkansas. The result of this has been that the entire range of States from Massachusetts to California north of Mason and Dixon's Line shows a remarkable homogeneity in vocabulary and pronunciation and intonation. To a considerable extent, the migration of the southern population has not widely deviated from the normal movement toward the setting sun. Of course, I am speaking in very general terms and taking no account of the Southerners who swarmed into Kansas before the Civil War, of the very considerable numbers of Northern investors who have settled in the South, and of the ambitious western farmers who have recently crossed the northern border and taken up lands in the Canadian Northwest.

What I wish now to emphasize is the fact that the older conditions have in large measure passed away; that the frontier has been pushed westward to the Pacific, that the wilderness has largely vanished; that the railroad, the electric trolley car, the motor car and, in particular, the telephone in every rural hamlet, to say nothing of the cheap newspaper and the cheap magazine, have, within the past decade, been rapidly transforming the older conditions of life in America and breaking up the isolation, which, more than anything else, tends to perpetuate dialectal words and pronunciations.

It would indeed be almost a miracle if old dialect words and forms and pronunciations were not swiftly vanishing from current speech in America just as has been the case in England. In the preface to the English Dialect Dictionary<sup>1</sup> the editor notes that "pure dialect speech is rapidly disappearing from our midst, and that within a few years it will be almost impossible to get accurate information about difficult points. Even now it is sometimes found extremely difficult to ascertain the exact pronunciation and the various shades of meanings, especially of words which occur both in the literary language and in the dialects." Time is required to establish a dialect, and except in our oldest American communities there has been lack of time and opportunity for the current speech to grow into dialectal forms. Some of the speech of the far West has been picturesque and vivid to a degree that defies reproduction here; but it has marvellously changed in a single generation, and in the course of another decade or two it may cease to be even a living memory.

<sup>1</sup> Page v.

Up to this point we have taken no account except of the native English element. But the most striking fact in the history of the settlement of the United States in the past half-century is the vast stream of immigrants that have poured into this country from every country of Europe. "The American," as Professor Münsterberg reminds us, "forgets too easily that the American nation is not a nation of Englishmen, but a new English-speaking people, in which the most various elements are fused into something new and original."<sup>2</sup> Millions of English, Irish, Scotch, Welsh, Germans, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, Lithuanians, Italians, Canadian French, Hungarians, Greeks, Poles, especially Polish Jews, Armenians and Bulgarians have, within the memory of nearly everyone here present, swarmed into this country and done what they could to modify the language that we try to speak. Note the conditions that obtain in Boston, in Lawrence, in New Bedford, in New York, in Chicago, and in hosts of other industrial communities throughout the land. Among these people the matter of prime importance is to be intelligible, and any term, whatever its origin, is likely to pass, provided only it is expressive and not too shocking.

We need not exaggerate the influence of this great foreign population upon our speech. It is true that there are considerable villages and towns in America where practically no English at all is heard, there are great quarters in all our cities where one is reminded at every turn of the speech of the Old World, but it is also true that these people as a whole recognize that their prosperity largely depends upon their mastery, for practical purposes, of the language of the country, and they learn a sort of

<sup>2</sup> *American Traits*, p. 20.

graceless jargon—what they call “United States”—in which they can express their material needs. The children of these people are often bilingual, using idioms of the foreign language translated literally into English, and sprinkling their German or their Swedish or their Italian with English terms. Said one proud German father: “Es freut mich, dass meine kinder nicht so viele English words brauchen als sie usen tun.”

Not for many centuries has England faced linguistic conditions even remotely comparable to ours, and even during the Danish invasions and the generations following the Norman Conquest there was little precisely like the linguistic problem confronting us in America. The fact to be particularly emphasized is that this foreign population is found, not merely in the cities and towns, but in the country. Countless abandoned farms in New England have been taken up by thrifty Poles and Swedes and Italians. The old New England stock is in many rural communities no longer the dominant race in point of numbers; and in the development of a language numbers are a controlling factor. As a result, quaint expressions current for generations in these ancient communities are no longer heard, for those who used them have vanished for ever.

But in spite of all adverse influences, there still exists in America a much larger amount of traditional material than we sometimes realize. Some of it is in the form of folklore represented by games and superstitions and old ballads, but a much larger amount survives in the words and phrases of an earlier age. As a rule, those who have the most valuable material for our purpose do not live in our busy centres, and they have to be sought out with care and handled with delicate tact.



They are found in the more secluded parts of New England, in the hill towns of the Green Mountains, in the Adirondack and the Catskill regions of New York, in the Eastern Shore district of Maryland and, in particular, among the mountains that wall off the Valley of the Mississippi from the Atlantic Coast. Many of the inhabitants of these regions, sturdy, shrewd and original, have preserved forms of speech that far antedate the War of the Revolution and that are no longer widely used in either England or America.

To gather this material is a task of immense extent, far more difficult to compass than most of the dialectal problems in England, where the restricted area, the relative immobility of the population, and the consecutive development of speech along lines laid down centuries ago, make it possible for the worker to check up and verify his data with comparative ease. It is obvious that in order to get results of much practical value one must determine with approximate accuracy the geographical limits within which a phrase or a pronunciation is current. An individual may use it in any place he happens to be. An untrained collector might thus without warrant determine that a chance New England phrase heard in Arizona represented the typical speech of Arizona.

Incidentally, I may remark, that we must guard against the impression that we are aiming merely to collect the so-called queer expressions. These are often picturesque and they are of untold value to the writer of dialect stories. But a dictionary of American speech must aim to be more than merely amusing or even merely historical; it must record the everyday language as it really is,—the vocabulary, the phonetic peculiarities, such as the geographical range of the nasal twang, of the guttural *r*, the *r* intro-

duced to fill a hiatus, as in *idear*, *Africar*, and a great variety of other matter.

How great our task is we may perhaps in a measure realize when we recall that the area of the United States is about sixty times as large as that of England, though the population is only about two and a half times as great. To collect the material for the English dictionary took twenty-three years, with the assistance of hundreds of workers. Even when it seemed that the material was sufficiently complete to warrant the editor in preparing copy for the press it was found that the amount would have to be doubled before it would be safe to issue a dictionary purporting to be authoritative. We may note that a part of the material included the eighty volumes published by the English Dialect Society.

To get this work properly done in America within a reasonable time is without question a matter of considerable difficulty. Notwithstanding all that has hitherto been accomplished, there is not at this moment an adequate record of the dialectal vocabulary of a single state in the Union. In none but exceptional cases are we able to trace with accuracy the geographical range of words and phrases characteristic of relatively limited districts. We lack both money and workers. Hitherto, an occasional collector has gathered, usually in an amateurish and unsystematic fashion, a list of terms employed in a region more or less familiar to him. All this is good as far as it goes, for the work of one amateur can be verified by the work of another. But whereas we can now count our active workers by twos and threes, here and there, we should have several hundred, proceeding according to a carefully devised plan and directed by a central bureau. According to this plan each state would be divided into

sections and placed in charge of a director supervising the active workers. He would distribute leaflets of instructions to collectors and slips of uniform size having assigned spaces for the word, the meaning, the region represented, and for a sentence illustrating the use of the term.

Obviously, the amount of time and effort and money that the work will cost will depend upon the sort of book we want. If we could be content with a mere collection of words and phrases known to be peculiar to America at some time and somewhere, but unverified as to their age or locality, we should need only to make a little more complete the collections that we now have. But a book constructed on such a plan would be practically useless for tracing the historical linguistic relation between a given district in America and the mother country, and would serve only to explain the meanings of words without considering the range of their distribution or the period in which they flourished.

But one objection to the plan as outlined is obvious, that the cost is prohibitive; and this is a very serious handicap. If dialect study had to do with some sort of parasitic microscopic worm, there would doubtless be no lack of help from the government or from a well-known institution, to follow up the little beast in all stages of development. What support we get must come from the annual dues of the American Dialect Society, with such contributions as interested men of means may choose to make. There has hitherto been a great amount of unremunerated labor bestowed upon the undertaking, and this will doubtless continue in even greater measure. But such help is in the nature of the case sporadic and hence very unequally distributed, usually lacking altogether at the point where

it is most needed. A certain number of paid regular workers appear indispensable if the undertaking is to make rapid progress.

In any case the money cost will be considerable, even before a line of the dictionary can be printed. Considering all these facts, and, in particular, the inevitable loss within a few years of all of those whose memories antedate the Civil War, may we not fairly appeal for a more active coöperation on the part of the members of the Modern Language Association and, through them, of the men of means whose financial aid is essential to the success of the undertaking?

WILLIAM EDWARD MEAD.